



COMMITTEE ON
**EDUCATION
& LABOR**
REPUBLICANS

**COMMITTEE
STATEMENT**

**Opening Statement of Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA), Republican Leader
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, & Secondary Education Hearing:
"Addressing the Impact of COVID-19 on Students with Disabilities"
May 6, 2021**

(As prepared for delivery)

“For the last 107 days, President Biden and my Democrat friends have ignored the science at the expense of our nation’s students, especially those with disabilities. This is not a partisan talking point – the New York Post recently reported on the Biden administration’s efforts to appease teachers unions on school reopening policies with the American Federation of Teachers referring to itself as the CDC’s ‘thought partner.’

Democrats on this very committee accused the Trump administration of politicizing the CDC but ignore the Biden administration’s blatant attempts to bend science to the will of its political allies.

To those students, educators, and families watching at home, let me be clear: the science is settled – schools can and should safely reopen now.

Research demonstrates that school-aged children are less likely to transmit the virus to others, including adults. Even in areas with high community spread, schools can safely reopen with three feet of social distancing and proper masking. Over 80 percent of K-12 teachers have been vaccinated and the FDA is set to expand Pfizer vaccine eligibility for 12- to 15-year-olds as early as next week.

This evidence is overwhelming; but still, only 49 percent of school districts are currently open for in-person instruction. That is a far cry from President Biden’s promise to fully reopen schools in his first 100 days.

The effects of school closures are heightened for students with disabilities, as many special needs children benefit from consistent and attentive 'in-person' instruction and services. Kids with special needs need routine, and I know this firsthand as my granddaughter has special needs. Thankfully Hampton's school didn't close and she's in full time, because at her school she receives physical therapy and if she goes even a week without that, it will really push her back. When you take these kids away from the classroom, that hurts them incredibly – they need to be in school. The lack of access to in-person instruction and services raises serious concerns about the impact on their academic progress and mental health. Among all students, self-reported mental health ratings dropped 40 percent since 2019 and mental health-related emergency room visits are up 31 percent for children ages 12 to 17.

Today, we will have the opportunity to hear from Reade Bush, a father of two special-needs children for whom those numbers are more than just statistics. Mr. Bush was forced to watch his nine-year-old son deteriorate before his eyes, to be admitted to a hospital because of the mental toll from social isolation. Mrs. Bush was forced to quit her job and homeschool their nine-year-old daughter after their public school failed to meet their daughter's Individualized Education Program needs, citing a virtual 4-day school week.

I'd like to send prayers to the Bush family and thank Reade for being willing to open up about this experience. We cannot sit idly by while our children cry out for help.

The CDC notes that children with disabilities are particularly impacted by the lack of interaction with peers as a result of online learning. This is an addition to projected learning loss, which is expected to be as high as 12 months for some children.

Unfortunately, even state and local leaders in many areas across the country have failed to provide adequate protections for students and their families. Parents are rightly frustrated – it is unbelievable that, in America, parents must fight for their special needs students to have the bare minimum of services provided to them.

Sadly, no matter how hard a school district works, remote learning cannot fully meet the needs of all students with disabilities. While distance learning is acceptable under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, there are state-

wide and district-wide policies that reduce or limit services specifically for students with disabilities.

Simply put, remote learning is making it more difficult for all students to learn and exacerbating difficulties for those most vulnerable students. The Democrat strategy- to put it generously- is not working. No amount of funding can cover for the President's weak leadership and coziness with groups that do not have students' best interests in mind.

While I am glad Democrats are acknowledging the difficulties facing students with disabilities during the pandemic, this hearing is pointless if Democrats continue to ignore the science and reject commonsense Republican proposals that would direct federal funds towards re-opened schools.

Republicans are more concerned with what a year of learning loss will do to a generation of young people than we are upsetting a few liberal elites. It's time Democrats were, too."

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